

Schoolwomen of the Prairies and Plains: Personal Narratives From Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska, 1860S to 1920S

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In the final analysis, moreover, the issues of draft fairness and a poor man's fight involve nineteenth-century perceptions of the Civil War in ways Geary fails to acknowledge. Farmers, artisans, unskilled laborers, and other working people in the nineteenth century, not just Democratic politicians and editors, as Geary asserts, thought the war and the draft placed unfair burdens on them, and no amount of quantitative data generated in the late twentieth century can alter that fact.

Schoolwomen of the Prairies and Plains: Personal Narratives from Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska, 1860s to 1920s, by Mary Hurlbut Cordier. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992. xi, 365 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.50 cloth.

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In *Schoolwomen of the Prairies and Plains*, Mary Hurlbut Cordier sets out to destroy the stereotype of the schoolmarm as either a reformer from the East or an ill-educated incompetent. Rather, Cordier emphasizes that many of the women who taught in Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas between 1870 and 1920 were very much a part of their communities, actively contributing to building and shaping the societies in which they lived. Furthermore, she argues that they were effective teachers because the rates of literacy in those three states were among the highest in the nation in spite of often primitive school structures, a lack of standard curricula or books, minimal educational opportunities for teachers, little formal support from state governments, and marginal financial resources. In her first section, Cordier uses census data, official and personal school records, personal diaries, writings and records of ninety-six women, education journals, and secondary sources to describe the educational and historical context for the succeeding (in part two) biographical accounts of five women who taught in Iowa and Nebraska in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

During the 1860s and 1870s, a rapidly increasing population and the desire of communities to educate their children dramatically increased the demand for teachers. For a number of reasons—the Civil War, other career opportunities, low pay, increasing lengths of school terms, and more demanding certification requirements—fewer men than women were willing to teach. This situation afforded opportunities to indigenous women for jobs outside of the home, for some economic independence, and for autonomy, while conforming to the

ideology that women's place was in the domestic sphere as nurturers of young children.

Cordier provides excellent portrayals of the educational communities that shaped her women, describing their own educational opportunities, the social and cultural structures of communities, and the structural, organizational, and instructional characteristics of rural schools. Her account of how and when institutions and curricula for educating teachers developed is enlivened by quotations from women about what the instructional and social opportunities meant to them. The religious, temperance, suffrage, political, and literary activities that many women participated in were also part of an all-encompassing communal educational process. At the same time, these women wove the exigencies of rural life—rough terrain, inclement weather, crowded living conditions, and prevalent disease—into their daily teaching routines. The chapter "Teaching and Learning in the Schools of the Prairies and Plains" offers the book's best account of the experiences of teachers in their schools, with descriptions of the physical attributes of the schools and grounds, the organization of the school day, the content and methods of instruction, and educational practices.

In part two, Cordier represents a variety of career paths and life choices through the personal diaries, records, memoirs, and oral histories of five women in the full panoply of their lives: families, education, romance and marriage, community involvement, and teaching and professional activities. The account of Nancy Higgins Gaddis (1862–1942), who taught briefly in Nebraska rural schools, is most valuable in demonstrating Gaddis's ideas about the values of education as manifested in the educational opportunities she and her husband provided their children. Sarah Jane Price (1841–1920) was a fascinating renaissance woman who combined teaching in Iowa and Nebraska with caring for her father and brothers, extensive gardening, buying and selling property, reading widely, composing and giving essays, and neighborly, all underpinned by an abiding religious faith and attendant church activities. Sarah Gillespie Huftalen's (1865–1955) long career in Iowa's rural schools and in administration and teacher education contains interesting snippets of community and educational politics as well as some analysis of the options available to her in career advancement. Although Bessie Tucker Gilmer's (b. 1898) teaching career spanned only four years in rural Nebraska schools before her marriage, teaching was her "lifelong ambition"; she wrote of her trials in dealing with difficult living and educational conditions and demonstrated her efforts to find better situations by moving to different schools. Conversely, Ethel Hale Russell (b. 1895) did not teach

in ungraded rural schools, but showed her adventurous spirit by teaching in Idaho and Utah graded schools after beginning her career in her native Nebraska. For Russell, an appointment in the Experimental School at the State University of Iowa in 1919 brought a change of direction leading to teacher education, completion of B.S. and M.A. degrees, and a subsequent faculty position at Western State Normal School in Michigan.

Throughout *Schoolwomen of the Prairies and Plains*, Cordier cautions that when women recorded their lives, they did not write about the details of their teaching and educational experiences. This creates a problem in the personal narratives, where the focus on teaching is often lost among other aspects of the women's lives. It is difficult to get an idea of what the women did in their roles as teachers and therefore difficult to find evidence to support Cordier's assertion of their effectiveness. Perhaps more tightly focused accounts would have eliminated this dissonance among the title of the book, one of its key arguments, and the substance of the narratives. Also, Cordier's theoretical stance that women's purpose in teaching was to extend and enhance their domestic roles forecloses an analysis of how these women viewed their own educational opportunities, opportunities that they did write about and that seemed very important to them. Did these women consider their terms at institutes, normal schools, and colleges as extensions of the domestic sphere or as entrances into a professional education community? Finally, there is a minor editorial concern: the Nineteenth Amendment, not the Twentieth (99), gave women the vote in 1920.

Overall, the life courses of women who added teaching to the joys and sorrows, problems and triumphs of their lives provide an important dimension to the literature of women on the frontier and to the history of education. Iowa readers will be particularly interested in Sarah Gillespie Huftalen's narrative, which is a good source of information about Iowa's education community. Moreover, the details of Huftalen's personal and family life are a fitting sequel to the life of her mother as told in Judy Nolte Lensink's *"A Secret to be Buried": The Diary and Life of Emily Hawley Gillespie, 1858-1888* (1989). Sarah's own story is told more fully in *"All Will Yet Be Well": The Diary of Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, 1873-1952* (1993). Finally, the book's extensive collection of photographs adds rich detail to its portrayal of the schools of the prairies and plains and of the women who taught their children.

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